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## Feeling Good About Myself. Real-Time Hermeneutics and its Consequences

### Abstract

Questions concerning the way in which digital games produce meaning and the possibility that their reconfigurability influences the process of interpretation have been debated since the very beginning of contemporary game studies. Based on general agreement between scholars, two areas of inquiry have been distinguished: the story produced by a game, and game mechanics, or rather all the information necessary to operate within them. The so-called “Game vs. Story division” has been analysed from multiple perspectives and theoretical standpoints<sup>1</sup>. Among the scholars adopting the hermeneutical angle, there seems to be a consensus regarding the two distinct interpretative processes that occur while a game is played, although they do not agree about which should be considered the primary one. Scholars arguing for the unique character of digital games tend to focus on the interpretation created while the game is played that relates to aspects of gameplay. They stress the importance of so-called “real-time hermeneutics”, as this is unprecedented in other media.<sup>2</sup> In turn, researchers questioning the specificity of games as a medium claim that a proper interpretation should concern itself with the stories produced through playing, rendering such interpretation similar to every other hermeneutical process. Therefore, the process of understanding a game could be explained within the

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<sup>1</sup> See Kapell, Matthew Wilhelm (ed). *The Play Versus Story Divide in Game Studies: Critical Essays*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland) (2015).

<sup>2</sup> Aarseth Espen, “Playing Research: Methodological Approaches to Game Analysis” in *Proceedings of the Digital Arts and Culture Conference* (2003), <http://www.bendevane.com/VT2012/herrstubbz/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/02.GameApproaches2.pdf>. 2003, date accessed 23 September 2017; Arjoranta Jonne, *Real-Time Hermeneutics: Meaning-Making in Ludonarrative Digital Games*. (Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä) (2015); Leino Olli Tapio, “Death loop as a feature” *Game Studies* 12:2 (2012); Karhulahti Veli-Matti, “Double Fine Adventure and the Double Hermeneutic Videogame” in *Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Fun and Games* (2012).

existing hermeneutical framework without any need to introduce media-specific interventions<sup>3</sup>.

In this paper, I will investigate the process of understanding video games, following the detailed, step-by-step description of interpretation provided by Paul Ricoeur in his American lectures<sup>4</sup>. In doing so, I will supplement the concept of “real life hermeneutics”<sup>5</sup> by narrowing the gap between interpreting game stories and gameplay situations. While such a perspective will bring me closer to a stance which denies any specificity to video games (at least regarding interpretation), I will also describe the key difference between understanding a video game and a traditional text, and briefly point towards its possible consequences, building upon Charles Taylor’s concept of ethics of authenticity<sup>6</sup>.

**Key words:** hermeneutics, video games, Ricoeur

## Ludo-hermeneutics, or How to Understand a Video Game

The difference between literary and game hermeneutics has been analysed by game scholars ever since Markku Eskelinen observed that “in art we might have to configure in order to be able to interpret whereas in games we have to interpret in order to be able to configure”<sup>7</sup>; this quote was later repeated in Espen Aarseth’s seminal paper on methodology of game studies<sup>8</sup>. In said paper, Aarseth introduced the concept of “real-time hermeneutics” based on the assumption that the key difference between the interpretation of a traditional text and that of a video game lies in the reflexivity of the former and the responsiveness of the latter. In other words, when confronted with a non-game textual object the reader perceives it as a whole and creates her interpretation at a pace that she, and only she, sets. The player needs to constantly adjust her interpretation, as the unstable environment of the game changes in response to her actions, undertaken as a result of said interpretation. Therefore, Aarseth claims that to play a game, the player needs to employ a skillset entirely different from the tools of the traditional textual interpretation. The process exposes the major dissimilarity between games and other media: “While the interpretation of a literary or filmic work will require certain analytical skills, the game requires analysis practiced as performance, with direct feedback from the system.

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<sup>3</sup> Kłosiński, Michał, „W stronę hermeneutyki gier komputerowych.” in *Teksty Drugie* 165:3 (2017), Kochanowicz, P. „Cybernetyczne doświadczenia”—fabularyzowane gry komputerowe w perspektywie hermeneutyki.” in *Homo Ludens* 5:1 (2013).

<sup>4</sup> Ricoeur Paul, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, TX: TCU Press) (1976).

<sup>5</sup> Aarseth 2003; Arjoranta 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor Charles, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press) (1992).

<sup>7</sup> Eskelinen Markku, “The Gaming Situation”, *Game Studies* 1:1 (2001).

<sup>8</sup> Aarseth 2003.

This is a dynamic, real-time hermeneutics that lacks a corresponding structure in film or literature”.<sup>9</sup>

The difference described by Aarseth was subsequently recognized as one of the defining qualities of a video game as a cultural object. As Jonne Arjoranta claims<sup>10</sup>, such a concept is crucial for both the proceduralist school of game analysis and for any scholarly attempt to create “game hermeneutics”. As far as the former is concerned, the interactive qualities of video games allow for a way of making arguments and expressing ideas with processes<sup>11</sup>. The latter needs to incorporate reconfigurative properties of games into the hermeneutical project. Arjoranta himself combines proceduralist arguments with a rich analysis of various temporal layers of the game, differentiating between the player’s made-on-the-fly interpretation and the understanding of the complete game as a cultural object<sup>12</sup>. The latter is always incomplete and indefinite, enriched by the passage of time, as it is governed by general rules of meaning-making as described by Hans-Georg Gadamer, and does not differentiate from any other interpretative effort. The former’s peculiar quality is the fact that it can be actively resisted by the game itself: “For example, if one interprets the Koopa Troopa turtles in Super Mario Bros. (Nintendo Creative Department 1985) as friendly and tries to hug them, it will probably result in the plumber-protagonist Mario losing his life. In this case, we can say that it is the wrong interpretation to make”.<sup>13</sup>

Velli-Matti Karhulahti’s “double hermeneutic circle” concept employs similar reasoning, using the Giddensian concept of double-hermeneutics as a point of departure<sup>14</sup>. Accordingly, to properly describe the process of meaning-making in video games, one needs to acknowledge this crucial fact: the very act of understanding leads to changes in the matter one is trying to interpret (as is true in social science analysis, according to Giddens). During play, there are two constant moves within two hermeneutic circles: the first is ludic-oriented, aiming to actively change the game in order to progress; the second is aesthetic and allows the game to be comprehended as a narrative, or, more broadly, as a text. The former is time-sensitive and sometimes resisted by the game, the latter is more reflexive and indefinite, as it is not rooted solely in the game system and is more open to traditional meaning-making procedures.

Olli Tapio Leino identifies two hermeneutical modes on the basis of game materiality. Every player produces her own idiosyncratic interpretation of aesthetical

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<sup>9</sup> Aarseth 2003, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Arjoranta 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Bogost Ian, “Process vs. Procedure” in *The Fourth International Conference of the Whitehead Research Project Metaphysics Things New Forms of Speculative Thought* (2010)  
<http://bogost.com/downloads/Bogost - Process vs. Procedure.pdf>, date accessed 23 September 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Arjoranta 2015, p. 59–60.

<sup>13</sup> Arjoranta 2011, p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Karhulahti 2012.

elements of the game world and story, and although such an interpretation is critical for an individual player's enjoyment, in order to properly understand the character of the game object (dubbed "playable artefact" by Leino), it is necessary to distinguish between what is idiosyncratic and intersubjective, as "intersubjective interpretations are those that the materiality of the artefact forces upon its players, i.e., on those whose desire to play is strong enough to survive the resistance with which the game artefact counters the project of playing".<sup>15</sup>

While Rafał Kochanowicz follows the practice of distinguishing between two hermeneutical practices in playing a game, his analysis is built upon Ricoeur's distinction between hermeneutics of faith and hermeneutics of suspicion. He moves past the play-story divide, arguing that the game is perceived in its totality, and the player chooses whether she follows the rules and submits to the regime of the gameplay, thus showing faith in the game's meanings, or if she tries to resist and defeat the game, especially when confronted with morally charged decisions. Although such a perspective seems to provide an alternative to the story-game divide, it also strongly suggests that game hermeneutics of suspicion are related to the player's agency, and the hermeneutics of faith to the lack thereof, therefore actually contributing to the existing divide.<sup>16</sup>

The hermeneutical project developed by Michał Kłosiński, although framed as a polemic with Arjoranta and Karhulahti, is built on a very similar preconception of a division between the game and the story. Moreover, the Polish author agrees with Arjoranta that interpretations of game stories can and should be analysed with the existing hermeneutic tools. Yet, he rejects the idea of game-related meaning-making, arguing after Gadamer that the game is a phenomenon entirely independent of the player. Reconfigurable elements of the game contribute to the interpretation, as they belong to the narrative in a fashion similar to any interpretation, being a recombination of how reality is perceived and understood. As a result, Kłosiński shifts his interest from the way the game produces meaning and in which it can be understood to analysis of the game as a tool to understand the world and gain self-knowledge<sup>17</sup>.

## Interpretation of In-Game Obstacles

Despite their differences, all the aforementioned propositions share the same conviction: when interacting with the game, the player needs to understand her situation based on textual clues the game provides, kinaesthetic directions given by the interface, and her own understanding of the media and the genre. Her task is to

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<sup>15</sup> Leino 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Kochanowicz 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Kłosiński 2017.

come up with a suitable solution to the problem at hand and employ it, to overcome the obstacle and to progress with the game. Whether the described situation broadens or narrows the margin of freedom the player has, in contrast to the reader of traditional texts, or if said situation is related to the overall interpretation of the game as an aesthetic object and to the player's self-knowledge, is subject to debate<sup>18</sup>.

I shall illustrate this basic interpretative procedure with an example I have already analysed elsewhere in greater detail<sup>19</sup>. In the game *Rise of the Argonauts* (Liquid Entertainment 2008), a lesser-known, ugly cousin of Sony's *God of War* (SCE Studios Santa Monica 2005), I, as the player, am taking on the role of Jason of Iolcos, captain of Argo, in his quest for the Golden Fleece. During the game, I can interact with the environment and talk to friendly NPCs, choosing dialogue lines, but my task is to battle hordes of enemies. During combat, I have to choose between three weapons to hurt the opponents most efficiently. To do so, I need to understand the relations between weaponry and various categories of enemies.

Luckily, beside the trial-and-error method, I have more tools in my interpretative toolbox. I can conjure classic tradition and relate the game's usage of weaponry to the description of arms in the source material, namely Greek mythology. I also have my experience with the genre conventions of video games and, more broadly, general knowledge on how melee combat is usually portrayed in Western culture. All this, combined with my former experiences with the game itself, helps me understand that a sword is useless against a heavily armoured foe, and agile opponents can easily avoid my mighty mace. It does not matter whether my pre-knowledge originates from the duel between Menelaus and Paris in Book 3 of *Iliad*, years of playing *Dungeons & Dragons*, or the repetitiveness of the game itself. Based on clues given by the game, I have to formulate—sometimes very quickly—a hypothesis about the best course of action. Then, my reasoning is confronted with some resistance, and I can measure its validity on the basis of my performance. If my Jason has been slain, it is time to formulate a new interpretation. Again, it is irrelevant whether the failure originates in the enemy's resistance to the chosen weapon or in my inability to deliver attacks: if I have died, it is time to figure out another course of action.

This example, even if crude, seems to confirm the previously described views on game hermeneutics. My experience playing *Rise of the Argonauts* confirms that the game resists an invalid interpretation, as described by Arjoranta, and there is constant interaction between the game system and the aesthetic background of the narrative, constituting Karhulahti's double hermeneutic circle and contributing to Leino's intersubjective interpretation. But there are still questions which remain unanswered: is the act of choosing a weapon somehow related to the overall interpretation of the game? Does the skillset required to understand my situation within the game differ from the one required in literary or film interpretation? And is this brief situation an

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<sup>18</sup> Karhulahti 2012, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Majkowski, Tomasz Z., "Złote Runo. Gra Wideo Jako Doświadczenie Interpretacyjne." in *Olbrzym w Cieniu. Gry wideo w kulturze audiowizualnej*, edited by Andrzej Pitrus, (Kraków: WUJ) (2012b).

interpretation at all, or just an element of the game performance, deprived of any deeper meaning that can be fished out during the hermeneutic process?<sup>20</sup>

Although the reader of a traditional book is very rarely confronted with a similar choice when she follows a linear narrative, on the very basic level of interpretation, there is no difference between the player and the reader: they both assume that “there is more”, and they need to overcome an obstacle to reveal a previously unknown part of the text. Despite all the differences in the very nature of said surplus and in the tools employed to overcome the obstacle, for both the reconfigurable and the static form the first interpretative move is quite similar: it begins with a guess.

## Validation of Hypothesis

Such a situation of both the player and the reader seems to be in line with the earliest stages of interpretation, as understood by Paul Ricoeur<sup>21</sup>. In his detailed description of the hermeneutic process, Ricoeur opposed the concept that a text can only be interpreted once it has been read in its entirety—the notion that traditional textual hermeneutics was built upon. Instead, he describes acts of reading and interpreting as inseparable: the reader constantly makes guesses about the meaning of the part she just finished in light of her knowledge of the book, the literary genre, the general education, and so forth<sup>22</sup>. The most basic example of such a guess would be asking the question “what will happen next?” In fact, there are whole genres based on the audience’s ability to make interpretations on the fly: without it, the crime story would be impossible.

Such a stance matches the concept of “real time hermeneutics”, or the time-sensitive aspect of Karhulahti’s proposal. Although the act of playing differs from the act of reading, the meaning-making part seems quite similar. When moving through a literary text, several interpretative guesses can also only be made in a specific moment—this is especially true for popular narratives with high shock value. The pleasure of making such guesses seems to underline the very pervasive fear of obtaining important information about the plot ahead of time, from a source different than the text itself—a procedure appropriately called “spoiling”. My pleasure in battling various opponents in *Rise of the Argonauts* was very similar: only at certain points of the game could I make new hypotheses about the best course of combat and put them to test to see if my guess was right.

The second part of the process hinted at in the previous sentence describes the necessary component of making a proper interpretation, which according to Paul

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<sup>20</sup> Kirkpatrick Graeme, *Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press) (2011); Kłosiński 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Ricoeur 1976.

<sup>22</sup> Ricoeur 1976, p. 75–78.

Ricoeur is the act of validation<sup>23</sup>. Through various means, the reader checks if her guess was correct. If she was mistaken, she can alter her hypothesis and proceed with reading. If she was correct, she can add another part to the growing understanding of the text. Here, another strong analogy emerges: in light of Ricoeurian theory, Arjoranta's claim that video games are the only texts capable of resisting interpretation seems untrue. When taking into consideration the basic form of meaning-making described above, detective fiction can render the reader's guess invalid by proving beyond doubt that the character suspected of being the murderer is in fact innocent. In another famous example, the idea of Ned Stark being the protagonist of George R. R. Martin's fantasy saga *The Song of Fire and Ice*<sup>24</sup>—a conviction very firmly rooted in genre conventions—is invalidated with the swing of the sword that takes off the character's head at the end of the first novel. The sudden conclusion of Stark's storyline has forced many readers to re-formulate their interpretations of said book saga.

In digital games, the described procedure of verifying an interpretative guess can be tied to the narrative unfolding as the player progresses. The narrative is usually presented in a linear manner, even if a story itself has many variants, and is depicted using cinematic or textual information; therefore, it is no different from watching a movie or reading a book, as Arjoranta and Kłosiński claim. This resistance that the games offer seems no different *on a purely interpretative level*<sup>25</sup>: in the cases of both games and literature, the player/reader needs to conjure her prior knowledge, add it to her ongoing interpretation made so far, and proceed accordingly. There is no difference in recognizing the antagonist within the story and on the level of gameplay: in both cases the projected course of the narrative includes either the protagonist's triumph over the villain, or their defeat. This seems to be true for every game in which the category of an antagonist exists: even in the *Civilization* series (MPS Labs, 1991 and subsequent), one needs to build a strategy on the assumption that Ghandi is either a trustworthy ally or a nuke-obsessed warmonger.

Nonetheless, it is important to stress that the aforementioned similarities do not equate video games to literature or cinema: the way of engagement and interaction is quite different for all these forms, and all the reconfigurable qualities of games still differentiate them from other media. My claim concerns only the parallel in the act of understanding the situation, as the basis of game hermeneutics, and that claim seems to be—so far—quite defensible. The main difference is in quantity, not in quality, as games challenge players' guesses more often. The very basic mechanism

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<sup>23</sup> Ricoeur 1976, p. 78–80.

<sup>24</sup> Martin George R. R., *A Game of Thrones* (New York: Bantam Spectra) (1996) and subsequent.

<sup>25</sup> There is an additional level of resistance offered by obstacles presented by the game. But overcoming said obstacles is not always related to the process of interpretation and usually relies on the dexterity or perceptiveness of the player and therefore cannot be treated as parts of interpretation. To put it simply: as Jason, sometimes I lose fights because I do not understand how to defeat my enemy (which provides the resistance to the game interpretation), and other times I am just clumsy with the controller.

of sense-making seems to be quite similar in games and other narrative-driven media: it is based on validation of interpretative guesses—the dialectics described by Ricoeur as his version of the hermeneutic circle.<sup>26</sup> This, however, is also the point at which things get complicated: even if games and texts share the procedure of guessing, the validation seems to be different.

## From Validation to Appropriation

To describe the other half of his circle, Ricoeur stresses the similarities between interpersonal and literary communication. In conversation, the process of validation can be done on the spot: if one participant is uncertain of the meaning, she can always ask her interlocutor to elaborate or explain. When words are put on paper, the reader has no such luxury, and if the text does not address her doubts directly—as in the case of crime fiction, a genre sometimes called “a game”<sup>27</sup>—she is at a loss. She can approximate the meaning by employing the validating techniques Ricoeur describes. But, in the end, she can never be certain, and this doubt opens up the very possibility of interpretation, understood as a search for non-literal, deeper meaning—the next part of the Ricoeurian hermeneutic process. After the reading is done, the reader can explain the meaning of the text as a whole, based on her previously validated guesses. This interpretation can be therefore comprehended by establishing some relation between the text and the world: as Ricoeur expresses it, “discourse cannot fail to be about something.”<sup>28</sup> If the point of reference is made, the reader is assured in the validity of the interpretation, and she can start the last, and the most crucial, part of the process, which the French hermeneutist calls “appropriation”: here, the reader finds out how the meaning of the text relates directly to her. This act can lead to self-discovery and enrichment of the reader’s identity, and discovering oneself through texts is one of the ultimate goals of interpretation in Ricoeur’s philosophy<sup>29</sup>.

Of course, not every literary text invokes such a long and complex process. The precondition is to leave the reader in doubt when the reading is finished. This is why between a poem and a popular novel that answers every question and plainly explains its references, the latter is less likely to transform the very identity of the reader—at least from the Ricoeurian perspective.

In the case of video games, the process of validation seems to lean towards a straightforward explanation, characteristic of live conversation. The interactivity, understood as the way in which the player and the game communicate with each

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<sup>26</sup> Ricoeur 1976, p. 79.

<sup>27</sup> Caillois Roger, *The Mystery Novel* (Bronxville: Laughing Buddha Press) (1984).

<sup>28</sup> Ricoeur 1976, p. 36.

<sup>29</sup> Ricoeur Paul, *From Text to Action* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press) (2007).



other in order to force some kind of reaction<sup>30</sup>, tends to turn the dialectics of guessing and validation into a series of yes-or-no questions. This used to be quite a spectacular aspect of playing the point and click adventure games of old: if at a loss, the player would try to click on every object and command at her disposal. This was, of course, an act of desperation, undertaken after exhausting all the options the player could come up with based on their interpretation thus far. For example, distracting the troll by throwing him a red herring in *The Secret of Monkey Island* (LucasFilm Games 1990) was beyond the scope of possible interpretations made by a teenager with limited knowledge of English idioms (such as myself at the time). Before I discovered the solution through trial and error, I had tried to attack the guardian with my cutlass, bribe him with alcohol, sneak around him—yet all the options I considered sound were rejected by the game.

The above example is extreme, but it illustrates three important characteristics of validating an interpretative guess in a video game. Firstly, there is a mechanism in place aimed at blocking some ideas, and sometimes rating the feasible ones as more or less correct by assigning them point value, differentiating the difficulty of employment, and so on. Secondly, the game forces the responsibility to progress the narrative on the player, while simultaneously refusing her the degree of control the reader usually has. Although sometimes the player can decide which way or in what order the story should progress, or she can even disregard the story entirely—the possibility Espen Aarseth identifies as the player's freedom<sup>31</sup>—she cannot skip the uninteresting parts of the game to reach the juicy ones faster, or to metaphorically peek at the last page. Thirdly, despite the perceived freedom, authorial intent seems to be more important in games than in literature or cinema: it is significantly harder to create a functional interpretation which is not in accordance with it, as only choices perceived as valid are permitted by the authors. In my *Secret of Monkey Island* example, I had to abandon my reasoning completely to progress the game, just as Ron Gilbert, Tim Schafer and Dave Grossman intended.

The conclusion so far is that although the beginning of the meaning-making process is very similar in video games and traditional narratives—at least according to hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur—the way of validating the interpretation shows several differences. In games it is more definitive, as it can deny the player progression and is much more frequent. This frequency is not without consequence: as Karhulahti observes,<sup>32</sup> it can lead to a very goal-oriented reading of a game in which the interpretative effort is subordinated to the need to overcome obstacles. Such an attitude results in fragmentation of the understanding: there is no need to produce a coherent interpretation of the game as it demands an immediate, local interpretation aimed at solving a puzzle at hand. As a result, difficulties may emerge with regard to

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<sup>30</sup> Arjoranta Jonne, "Do We Need Real-Time Hermeneutics? Structures of Meaning in Games." in *DiGRA 2011: Think Design Play* (2011), <http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/11310.17396.pdf>, date accessed 23 September 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Aarseth 2003.

<sup>32</sup> Karhulahti 2012.

following the details of the game story or connecting the transaction of the avatar's achievements to the overall narrative.

The difference between games and other media is very clear when one compares a fragmented interpretation of a game with crime fiction, the most game-like genre. In both cases, there is a constant need to validate the interpretation in light of new facts and situations. Yet, in a detective story each revision adds to the overall understanding of the plot: if the prime suspect turns out to be innocent, the reader needs to go back and revise her understanding of the plot as a whole. In games, there is no such need as validation usually relates to a particular situation. When I discover a new way of dispatching enemies in the game I am playing, there is no need to go back and create a new interpretation in which the protagonist struggled with his combat inefficiencies until he discovered a new, better fighting technique. Such a move is replaced with a simple recognition: from now on, I, the player, know a better way to play my game. Of course, the aforementioned revision is entirely possible, though it is simply unnecessary to make sense of the game—the quality that leads to the separation of ludic and aesthetic hermeneutics in various theories<sup>33</sup>. However, my claim is that there is no separation in meaning-making procedures between the ludic and the aesthetic, and the perceived division comes from a very visible, present, and pleasurable validating mechanism. The reduced need for coherent interpretation is a result of hastened fulfilment: contrary to crime fiction, the player does not need to wait until the end to know if she understands the game correctly as it constantly delivers her ways to validate her skill in interpretation. From the hermeneutic point of view, a video game can be perceived as a machine to deliver recognition and reward for interpretative competence.

The preoccupation with validation and the definitive nature of the process lead to further dissimilarity between video games and literary hermeneutics, namely, a diminishing need for explanation and for undertaking the subsequent steps. As stated before, the work of an interpretation in Ricoeur's theory is not done when the book is finished—there is always doubt if one has understood it correctly. As a result, no interpretation is definite and closed; it can always be compared to other interpretations, rooted in experiences, knowledge and needs of different readers. This purely reflexive part of interpretation somehow seems to be blocked by video game mechanisms—if the player successfully reaches the end, it means she understood everything correctly. The need to find a point of reference for the text is also diminished, as complex video games pride themselves on accurately simulating the world. In order to go further with the interpretation, one has to suppress the claim that the game's validating mechanism is definitive. A coherent interpretation needs to be deprived of "gameness", understood here as a fractured collection of local struggles with various obstacles. It is no coincidence that many game interpretations distance themselves from actual gameplay<sup>34</sup> and some games look for

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<sup>33</sup> see Arjoranta 2015.

<sup>34</sup> Leino 2012; Möring Sebastian, "Freedom in Games—Between Fear and Boredom." *Proceedings of the Philosophy of Computer Games* (2013a), <http://gamephilosophy2014.org/wp->

a way to reduce the pervasiveness of the validation process, for example by reducing the number of obstacles to overcome, as “walking simulators” fashioned after *Dear Esther* (Chinese Room, 2012) do. As Michał Kłosiński claims, to employ a game as a way to understand the world and enrich oneself, it is necessary to move from gameness to narrativity.<sup>35</sup>

## Playing the Game My Way

Privileging validation over other parts of the interpretative process leads to yet another effect. In simple games, with gameplay either straightforward or reduced merely to a background for the narrative (as was the case of adventure games), the validation is based solely on authorial intent. The player needs to guess the correct order of conduct and execute it accordingly. I cannot alter the course of *The Secret of Monkey Island* by—let us say—focusing on honing the navigation skill of Guybrush Threepwood instead of his swordsmanship. The only way to measure skill is time: a skilled player can beat the game more quickly. But there are titles that offer more than a single way to accomplish tasks. After ruling out everything impossible, they let the player decide how to proceed, sometimes allowing for astonishing creativity, like the famous employment of a gravity gun to power up jumps in *Half-Life 2* (Valve 2004). Even my Jason of Iolcos has a margin for freedom: he can ignore certain side quests, decide the order in which the four major parts of the plot are resolved, choose two out of four Argonauts as his companions during the adventure, and use different weapons in combat. Some of those choices are validated, other resisted. While playing, I was trying to simultaneously guess the best course of conduct as designed, and trim the game down to my personal taste, for example by reducing the amount of combat or helping out every miserable NPC on my way towards the Golden Fleece—searching for the balance between the idiosyncratic and the intersubjective.

This freedom to choose, described as one of the definitive qualities of video games, has been recognized by Arjoranta and Kochanowicz as an opportunity for self-reflection for players. As Arjoranta explains: “While all works of art have a chance to tell us something about ourselves, games, perhaps, excel in this. In order to play, the player must act, make choices, and see what kind of consequences those choices have, while the game evaluates some of those choices (...) Not all games support this equally, but again, ludonarrative games have the frameworks required to make ethical and existential questions meaningful”.<sup>36</sup>

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content/uploads/2014/11/Sebastian-Moering-2014.-Freedom-in-Games\_1st-draft.-PCG2014.pdf, date accessed 23 September 2017.

<sup>35</sup> Kłosiński 2017, p. 67.

<sup>36</sup> Arjoranta 2015, p. 61.

I claim otherwise. By combining authorial intent with personal preference, the player seeks recognition for her hermeneutic skills: she wants to be recognized as both a good, obedient reader, keen to follow what the game narrative proposes, and as an innovator, bringing her unique style and ingenuity to the game. Simultaneously, the freedom to choose can be seen as a factor obscuring self-awareness, as the player is prone to repeating her choices in each and every game. For example, I always play as a good guy, trying to help the needy and seeking the best and most selfless solutions to moral dilemmas, regardless of the overall game aesthetics. Doing so, I am leaning towards the style Jaroslav Švelch called “honest moral gameplay”<sup>37</sup>. Given a choice, I actively avoid scenarios alien to my moral code; as a result, I dodge confrontation with disturbing situations which could lead me to better self-knowledge. To invoke moral impact, it is common for video games to limit their player’s choice—as *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development 2012) does—or to obscure some elements of the narrative, diminishing the chance of proper interpretation, and therefore challenging the player’s ability to gain validation, which is the way of *The Witcher* (CD Projekt RED, 2007 and subsequent). Because of the focus on validation, video games preoccupy players with their own actions and their own hermeneutic skills, rather than creating a possibility for a meaningful interaction with text<sup>38</sup>. This seems to be a serious impediment on the road to a full Ricoeurian interpretation, a tool to transform oneself by interacting with the world of the text.

But it does not mean that games are of less worth compared to literature, or that they are simply a feel-good medium unless they are heavily-loaded with literary or cinematic elements to make them less gamey. In a way, they even seem similar to postmodern meta-fiction, which combines traditional interpretative possibilities with the pleasure of recognizing intertextual references. Therefore, to understand the game-specific hermeneutic process, it is only reasonable to ask why validation is so important, and where the hermeneutic circle of guess and validation present within video games can lead us. One possible answer can be found in the concept of consolation—the quality Umberto Eco found essential to popular narrative<sup>39</sup>. In video games, consolation comes from the game reassuring the player that she is good at interpretation by measuring her skill and validating her guesses. In fact, games do it better than literature or cinema because they simultaneously leave no room for doubt while assuring the player of her authenticity: after all, it is her guess that gets validated, and her interpretative stance, carried from game to game, that matters.

A description of a fairly similar process can be found in Charles Taylor’s analysis of sources for contemporary morality<sup>40</sup>. According to the Canadian philosopher, the

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<sup>37</sup> Švelch Jaroslav, “The Good, the Bad, and the Player: The Challenges to Moral Engagement in Single-Player Avatar-Based Video Games.” in *Ethics and Game Design*, edited by Karen Schrier and David Gibson (New York: Hershey) (2010).

<sup>38</sup> Ricoeur 2007.

<sup>39</sup> Eco, Umberto, *Il Superuomo Di Massa: Retorica E Ideologia Nel Romanzo Popolare* (Rome: Bompiani) (2012).

<sup>40</sup> Taylor 1992.

main source of rejecting normative ethics in favour of a self-constructed morality lies in the interaction between the strong sense of self—understood as an independent and unique way of being human—and the horizon of values established by the community. The first component, rooted in the Romantic notion of individuality, drives a person towards freedom to pursue happiness any way she chooses. But, according to Taylor, it does not necessarily result in a crumbling society of narcissistic egomaniacs, as there is an important precondition to pursuing personal goals: if one recognizes such an endeavour as her supreme right, one needs to give other members of her community the same right. Also, even if that person is free to choose personal beliefs, she “couldn't just decide that the most significant action is wiggling [her] toes in warm mud. Without a special explanation, this is not an intelligible claim<sup>41</sup> and she has to measure the choice against the general convictions held by the community. Consequently, the ethics of authenticity can be perceived as result of the tension between individualism and the shared pool of values. This tension serves as the basis for both an individual interpretation of the world and community-generated recognition. In the example analysed by Taylor (the society of the United States in the late 1980s) the common denominator was instrumental rationality: one was allowed to pursue different goals as long as they were profitable and possible to explain.

The analysis I summarize here very briefly and crudely seems strangely similar to the central mechanism of the video games I discussed earlier. The player is free to play however she likes, as long as it is in line with the game's established set of values. Those are usually instrumental, as everything and everybody the protagonist encounters is useable, rational, and easily quantifiable. This remains true even for another human's misery: every trouble of every NPC my Jason encountered on his path was an opportunity to gain some experience points and other rewards, as well as to get possible help in the main quest. Although seemingly noble and selfless, my protagonist always had one eye on the prize. The efficacy of a player's interpretative guess is at least partially dependent on those values: for example, it is important to recognize a call for help as an opportunity to profit, and act accordingly. This way players' effort can be validated, quantified, and rewarded, creating a common horizon of values for all users of the same game. Someone resisting this quantification, for reasons Sicart, Arjoranta and Švelch point out,<sup>42</sup> is therefore either a quirky loner or a member of the community sharing his resistance, thus using values of the game as a negative point of reference in their common horizon<sup>43</sup>. The important factor of playing a game would therefore be connected to the larger issue of authenticity, as Taylor understands it: certain players need to use all their skills to understand and

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<sup>41</sup> Taylor 1992, p. 36.

<sup>42</sup> Sicart Miguel, *The Ethics of Computer Games* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press) (2009); Arjoranta 2015; Švelch 2010.

<sup>43</sup> Westerlaken, Michelle. "Self-Fashioning in Action: Zelda's Breath of the Wild Vegan Run." *Proceedings of the Philosophy of Computer Games* (2017), [http://muep.mau.se/bitstream/handle/2043/23973/POCG17\\_Westerlaken\\_Self\\_Fashioning\\_in\\_Action.pdf?sequence=2](http://muep.mau.se/bitstream/handle/2043/23973/POCG17_Westerlaken_Self_Fashioning_in_Action.pdf?sequence=2).

execute the game in their own, particular way, which is measurable against efforts of different players, framed by overall moves permitted and considered meaningful by the game system. To put it more simply: to win, my Jason needs to eliminate hordes of enemies with either a sword, a spear, or a mace. And every Argonaut/player has the freedom to choose one of these tools, based on her understanding of the game mechanics, genre tradition, and knowledge of Apollonius of Rhodes or Robert Graves. Then, her efforts can be measured and compared with the efficiency of others. The one thing she cannot do is reject violence and search for a diplomatic solution: it is outside *Rise of the Argonauts*' horizon of values.

The analogy between the process of meaning making in video games and Tayloran ethics of authenticity is of course quite crude and needs deeper, more inquisitive development, which I have already attempted elsewhere<sup>44</sup>. Here, I use it solely to point out three possible consequences of hermeneutics that privilege validation over explanation. Firstly, even if Taylor's observation from the late 1980s is no longer valid, his book was created in the same cultural climate that made the rise of video games possible. The connection, even if presented here in a slightly superficial manner, might explain the increasing importance of video games as a cultural form: in a way, they have become a model for good life, according to the ethics of authenticity. Therefore, the important cultural function of video games could be explained in terms of Roger Caillois' classic observation: "It is not absurd to try diagnosing a civilization in terms of the games that are especially popular there. In fact, if games are cultural factors and images, it follows that to a certain degree a civilization and its content may be characterized by its games".<sup>45</sup>

Secondly, there is a severe difference between the ethics of Taylor and Ricoeur: the first scholar describes the relationship between the text and the self as an expression of the latter projected onto the former, based on an individual search for values. Ricoeur's view is directly the opposite: there is no other way towards self-awareness but through searching for similarities within the text, and, in the presented case, by appropriating literature<sup>46</sup>. Video games as analysed here can serve as a case to support Taylor's claim: confronted with an obstacle, the player uses her pre-established strategy of understanding, rooted in her confidence with skills and knowledge she already possesses. This way she reaffirms her strategy of being herself, instead of expanding her self-knowledge and transforming the self as a result of contact with the game text, as Ricoeur would postulate. This leads to the third conclusion: such a reassuring and culturally important way of experiencing narratives could possibly be

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<sup>44</sup> Majkowski, Tomasz Z. "Gry wideo i kultura autentyczności." in *Homo Ludens* 3:1 (2011); Majkowski Tomasz Z. „Gra wideo jako model dobrego życia” in *Kultura Zabawy* edited by Paleczny Tadeusz, Kantor Ryszard, Banaszkiewicz Magdalena (Kraków: Wydawnictwo UJ) (2012a).

<sup>45</sup> Caillois Roger, *Man, Play, Games* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press) (1961), p. 83.

<sup>46</sup> Laitinen Arto, "Charles Taylor and Paul Ricoeur on Self-Interpretations and Narrative Identity." in *Narrative Research: Voices of Teachers and Philosophers*, edited by Rauno Huttunen, Hannu Heikkinen, and Leena Syrjälä (Jyväskylä: SoPhi) (2002).

of some importance to people playing video games. And, as it seems, it is. Self-professed hardcore gamers tend to distance themselves from games they believe too easy or not game-like enough, as such games do not provide enough validation for their hermeneutic competence, in the way in which children's rhymes do not satisfy people with a taste for T. S. Eliot. They also tend to resist attempts made to interpret video games in a more traditional fashion, by explaining their meaning and comprehending it: sometimes they even show hostility towards people with different hermeneutic strategies<sup>47</sup>. Such interpretative shenanigans threaten their sense of self, as measured against a rational and efficient scale of being skilful at playing mainstream video games.

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<sup>47</sup> Mortensen Torill Elvira, "Anger, Fear, and Games: The Long Event of #GamerGate." *Games and Culture Online First* (2016).

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